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## AN EXAMINATION OF LINEBACKER II

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AN EXAMINATION OF LINEBACKER II

by  
Irvin Lon Cakerice  
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A RESEARCH REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY  
IN  
FULFILLMENT OF THE CURRICULUM REQUIREMENT

Advisor: Lt Col Harvey Moody

MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**TITLE:** An Examination of Linebacker II

**AUTHOR:** Irvin Lon Cakerice, Lieutenant Colonel, USAF

Much has been written about the reasons why the United States lost the Vietnam War, and much has been conflicting in nature. Even today, several ex-military who participated in the war are convinced it was not lost, and Linebacker II supports their claim. This paper uses a model for developing military strategy to examine Linebacker II since it may have been as positive as any event or campaign during the war. The Vietnam War destroyed two United States presidents, alienated the youth of the country, debased its currency and stunted the country's will and ability to use military force to protect national interest to this day. Did we learn anything from the war and in particular Linebacker II or are we destined to repeat the first war the United States lost in modern times.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lieutenant Colonel Irvin Lon Cakerice (M.A., Webster University) has been interested in the Vietnam War and in particular, the air war since he was stationed in Andersen Air Force Base in Guam and U-Tapau Air Base in Thailand during the War. He flew several post-Linebacker II combat missions in the B-52D in 1973 and several more conventional training missions in the area during 1974. He is a graduate of the Air Command and Staff College and a classmember of the Air War College, class of 1994.

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## CHAPTER I

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is [rightly to understand] the kind of war on which they are embarking, neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.

Carl Von Clausewitz<sup>1</sup>

Much has been written about the reasons why the United States lost the Vietnam War, and much of it is conflicting in nature. This may well be because the Vietnam War was the first war the United States lost in modern times. The blame for the loss varies depending on the perspective (political and military) of the writer. The Carl Clausewitz quotation used to open this paper further supports this claim. Regardless of who is to be blamed for the defeat, no one can discount the facts: the United States lost 58,000 lives and the confidence and trust in its political and military leaders; spent \$150 billion; and left the fate of thousands of POWs and MIAs unanswered. Even in this lost cause, there were some positive results with valuable military/political lessons. One such event was Linebacker II, also known as the

Christmas Bombing or the Eleven-Day War. This December 1972 campaign effectively employed air power--both tactical and strategic--against vital targets in and near Hanoi and Haiphong. This was the first time in the war that strategic targets were struck with the determination advocated by Air Force commanders since the onset of the conflict.<sup>2</sup> This directly led to the success of Linebacker II.

This paper examines Linebacker II using Dr. William P. Snyder's model for developing strategy. This model defines military strategy as a broad concept that includes a military objective and a plan to achieve that objective by means of military resources.<sup>3</sup> Tying the objective or goal with the resources or assets is the plan or concept.

Also included in the Snyder model of strategy are several variables which can become essential in the development of strategy. Technology, doctrine, political-military relationships, national style, and leadership play an important part in the planning process.<sup>4</sup> After developing how Linebacker II fits into this model, this paper will briefly describe the campaign and address some lessons learned from the operation.

## CHAPTER II

### SNYDER STRATEGY MODEL

When looking at the objectives of the Vietnam War, it is important to look at the enemy's objectives first. Whether viewing the war as an insurgency represented by the Viet Cong or a conventional war waged by North Vietnam regular troops, the objectives of the enemy remained constant. Since 1954, the object was to absorb the people of South Vietnam into a single Communist state under the rule of Ho Chi Minh and his associates in Hanoi. A lesser objective was to undermine the position of the United States in Asia while demonstrating that the "War of Liberation" was a cheap, safe, and disavowable technique for future expansion of militant Communism.<sup>5</sup>

The objectives restated by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965 were independence and freedom from attack for South Vietnam. The United States wanted nothing for itself. The secondary objective was to prove that "Wars of Liberation" were far from being either cheap or safe, and might also be doomed to failure.<sup>6</sup> For Johnson, victory was an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam, and a North Vietnam that accepted that condition as the status quo.<sup>7</sup> Based on these political objectives, the military found its



objectives did not include winning, but rather to persuade the enemy that he could not win.<sup>8</sup> The use of air offensives aided in this persuasion. The Rolling Thunder air campaign focused on achieving the goal of an independent South Vietnam by targeting lines of communication south of the 19th parallel. The Air Force argued that the focus should be on the centers of the North's war-making capacity and will to fight, and identified 94 key targets.<sup>9</sup> Johnson was afraid that striking these targets would provoke either the Chinese or the Russians, and ultimately bring about World War III. Therefore, the plan called for carefully controlled escalation of bombing that would ultimately prove too costly for the North, which would then sue for peace.

In retrospect, just the opposite happened. Johnson's use of air power prolonged the war by calling for bombing halts more than a dozen times during the campaign, while trying to negotiate for an end to the war. The tolerance of the United States for this war proved less than that of the enemy's and it still lasted eight years. Though the 643,000 tons of bombs used during Rolling Thunder destroyed 65 percent of the North's oil-storage capacity, 59 percent of its power plants, 55 percent of its major bridges, nearly 10,000 vehicles, and 2,000 railroad cars, it also provoked the Chinese and the Russians to increase supplies to North Vietnam.<sup>10</sup>

When President Nixon replaced President Johnson, Nixon's objective was also to ensure an independent, non-Communist Vietnam. By this stage of the war, however, he was looking for an end to the war and honorable withdrawal from the country without abandoning the primary objective or giving the appearance of defeat.<sup>11</sup> Nixon also wanted to assure South Vietnam's President Nguyen Thieu that the United States was still a dependable ally. Another important difference between Johnson and Nixon was that Nixon did not have the concerns that Johnson had because of détente with both the Chinese and the Soviets.

He also regained public support with the reduction of American combat troops in Southeast Asia (which also eliminated one of his resources) and the blatant nature of the Easter offensive in the spring of 1972. But he knew he had to win the war quickly or he would lose that public support. His first response was Linebacker I beginning in April 1972 and ending in October 1972. With the Easter offensive, the war had taken on a more conventional appearance rather than a guerrilla war, and the North Vietnamese appeared to be the aggressor. This also diminished the fear of escalating the war into a world war and the bombing became more effective. Strategic bombing as United States doctrine detailed was now becoming an effective form of attacking the enemy and as American ground troops pulled out, the only way to do so.

One of the key elements of Snyder's model is resources. Presidents Johnson and Nixon had similar air-power resources available. Although the United States Air Force was still considered the most powerful in the world, the American doctrine did not adequately address a limited, unconventional war, even though the Korean conflict had exposed the United States to a limited war scenario. The United States military had difficulty realizing that a limited unconventional war did not present clear centers of gravity. The quantity of the air-power resource was not the problem. The misapplication--as a result of the political-military relationship and other factors--squandered many opportunities throughout the war and is a large part of its \$150 billion price tag. During the war, the United States lost more than 2,500 fixed-wing aircraft and nearly 3,600 helicopters to hostile action. Altogether, more than 3,700 fixed-wing aircraft and nearly 4,900 helicopters were lost in connection with the war.<sup>12</sup>

The objectives in Vietnam were fairly clear and consistent under all three American presidents. The attainability of these objectives was questionable, however, and further complicated the strategy-forming process. Adding variables to this process further muddied the water. The variable of technology was critical in building American overconfidence and overestimating the military's capability.

This combination of overconfidence and overestimating the United States military capability made planning very difficult. To make things even worse, the United States underestimated the enemy's ability and determination to meet its goals. The North developed comprehensive air defenses including aircraft, AAA, and SAMs. Only the last few days of Linebacker II saw these defenses nullified. Though the North received technology from the Chinese and the Soviets, it was not all first-line technology. But it was a good enough "mix" to get the job done.

Doctrine, another variable, is defined as "fundamental principles by which the military forces . . . guide their actions in support of national objectives."<sup>13</sup> Air Force doctrine during Vietnam stressed the need for unbridled air power with unconditional surrender as the preferred military objective. Fundamentals of strategic bombing left over from World War II drove the doctrine. Obviously, this doctrine was at variance with the political and military realities of the war until the war took on a conventional appearance and Nixon approved Linebacker II.

Little has changed in Air Force doctrine since Vietnam, primarily because Linebacker II convinced the Air Force that destroying vital targets will result in the loss of an enemy's war-making capacity or will to fight regardless of the type of war. Some of the idea was that if you could fight and win a

big war, you could always do so in a small war. But winning this was not the political objective of the war.

To have a sound political-military relationship, politicians must allow military leaders to be involved in the planning process. In turn, the military must trust the political leaders to assess domestic issues, including public support of military operations. Both are essential for a balanced strategy.<sup>14</sup> It was not the case during Vietnam. The White House micromanaged much of the air campaign because mutual distrust and suspicion by both parties characterized this relationship.<sup>15</sup>

Another variable important in planning is national style. Snyder stated that a nation's strategies are influenced by history, culture, geography, and its past military experiences.<sup>16</sup> It is easy to see why the United States went into the Vietnam War expecting a quick and decisive victory for democracy. The United States--a superpower with nearly unlimited resources--had never lost a war, and had a decade earlier concluded what many thought was a similar conflict in Korea. Because the United States was accustomed to viewing conflicts from an American perspective, it totally misread the national style of the two Vietnams--North and South. The American planners should have looked at the history, culture, geography, and past experiences of Vietnam to understand what the country was getting into.

According to Snyder, leadership is the most important variable. He feels this way because resources may limit strategic choices; technology, doctrine, political-military relationships, and national style can influence planning, but leadership determines or dictates the final strategy.<sup>17</sup> Snyder suggests that good leaders oversee the development of effective strategy. The good leader surrounds himself with high-quality planners with diverse interests and experiences. The good leader can clearly define the objectives and apply known resources to achieve the objective. After all the variables are taken into consideration, the most efficient and cost-effective alternative is chosen. On the other hand, the inability of poor leaders to match the objectives and the resources dooms the strategy to failure. This appears to have happened in Vietnam, except in the Linebacker II campaign.

Remembering Snyder's definition of military strategy as a broad concept that includes military objectives and a plan or concept for achieving the objectives by means of military resources, the Linebacker II plan stressed a maximum effort in minimum time against "the most lucrative and valuable targets in North Vietnam."<sup>18</sup> The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Thomas Moorer, was held personally responsible by President Nixon to win the war, or more realistically, to achieve the objectives by using military power effectively. He was to limit civilian losses, choosing strategic

targets that included railyards, storage areas, power plants, communication centers, and airfields close to the enemy's center of gravity, Hanoi. The choice of weapons was the heart of the United States strategic nuclear deterrent, the B-52, which had been adapted for conventional bombing.

Supporting the B-52s were F-111s, F-4s, EB-66s, F-105s, and Navy aircraft from carrier task forces in the area. The B-52s would strike at night using 500- and 750-pound conventional bombs, while Navy and 7th Air Force aircraft would strike targets in the daylight with precision weapons ("smart bombs").

## CHAPTER III

### LINEBACKER II DAY BY DAY

18 December 1972

On day one, 129 B-52s were launched in three waves from Andersen Air Force Base in Guam and U-Tapoa Air Base in Thailand. At 1945, 48 B-52s released their weapons on a storage complex, railroad yard, and three airfields on the outskirts of Hanoi. Thirty-nine support aircraft accompanied the bombers. Routing for the attacks, planned in Washington, brought the B-52s from the west of Hanoi heading southeast for the bomb run. At midnight and 0500, the second and third waves followed the same routing. Planners estimated acceptable B-52 losses would be 3 percent. On the first day, three B-52s (slightly less than 3 percent) were destroyed and two were severely damaged. On the positive side, 94 percent hit their targets (See Figure 1).

19-20 December 1972

Days two and three were nearly identical to day one in both routing and number of sorties flown. Though the losses on day one were a concern and crew members began



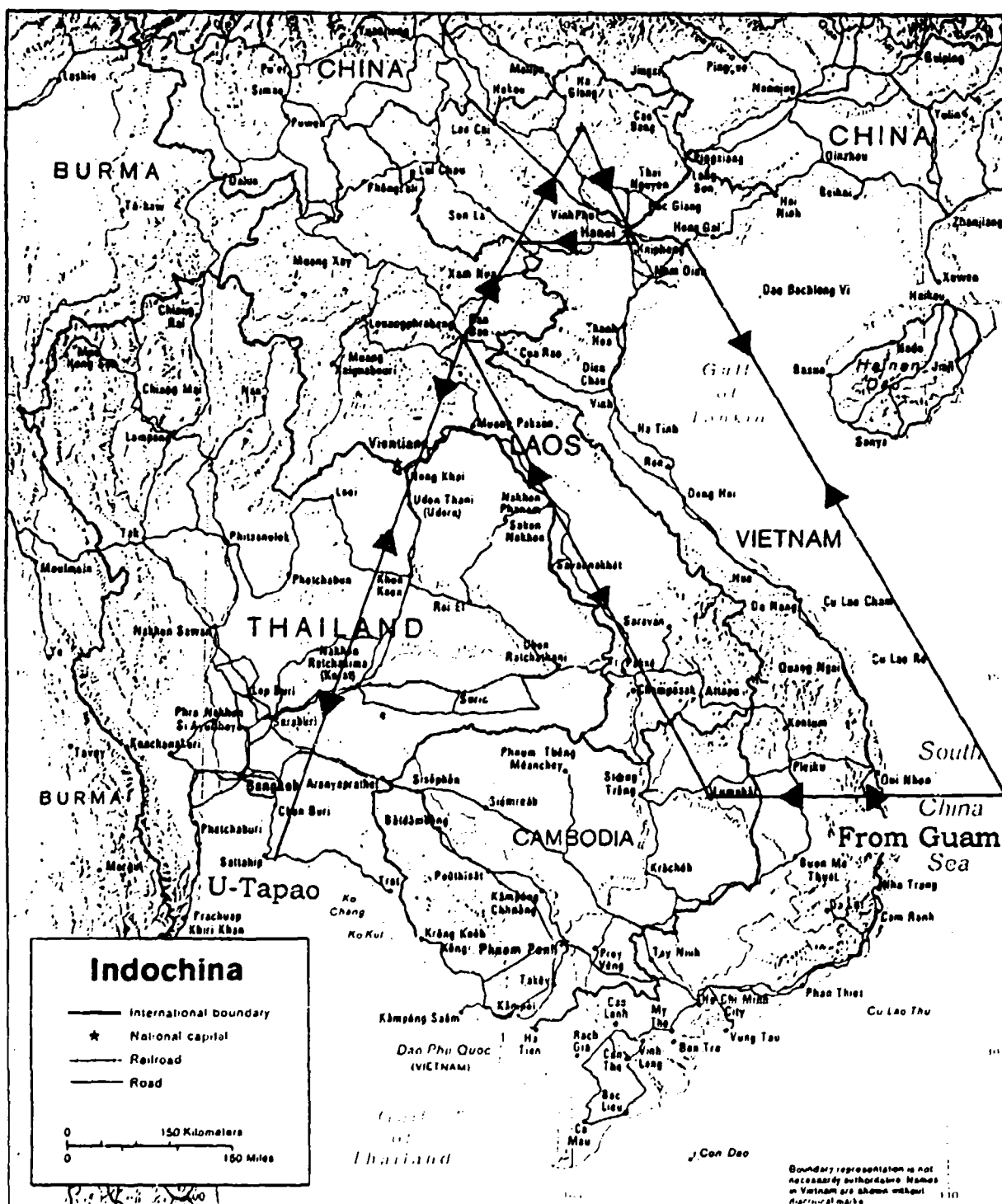


Figure 1

B-52 Routes Day 1-3

suggesting routing and timing changes, they were considered acceptable losses. Also, the need to complete mission planning forty-two hours prior to initial takeoff precluded routing changes. On 19 December, 93 B-52s attacked a thermal power plant and railroad yards. Two aircraft were damaged; none were destroyed. This success on day two further strengthened the arguments by the planners that standard routing in and out of the target area would benefit the inexperienced crews. On 20 December, failure to heed the crews' suggestion to adjust the attack plan cost the United States dearly. Six B-52s were lost and a seventh was damaged--a 5 to 6 percent loss.

Because of these losses, President Nixon extended the bombing campaign indefinitely. He decided it was essential that the bomber forces accomplish the highlevel of destruction "guaranteed" by the strategic bombing campaign. But the current trend of heavy losses was doing just the opposite of what he wished for, "getting Hanoi back to the peace talks ready to bring the war to an end."

21 December 1972

Commanders and planners agreed that the six percent losses on day three were unacceptable. Starting on day four, the number of sorties was reduced to 30 per day, SAM

storage facilities were targeted, and all missions were flown out of U-Tapao. Two more B-52s were lost on 21 December, so further adjustments were made. Attacks were prohibited to the immediate vicinity of Hanoi and routing varied considerably on the subsequent missions.

22-23 December 1972

Haiphong became an additional target area starting on 22 December. For the next two days, railroad yards, storage facilities, and SAM sites in the northeastern part of the country were targeted. On 23 December, the B-52s flew through the Chinese buffer zone to hit their targets (See Figure 1).

24 December 1972

On day seven, routing continued to be altered, and the results for this three-day period were no B-52 losses and only one damaged. Nixon declared a 36-hour bombing pause for Christmas.

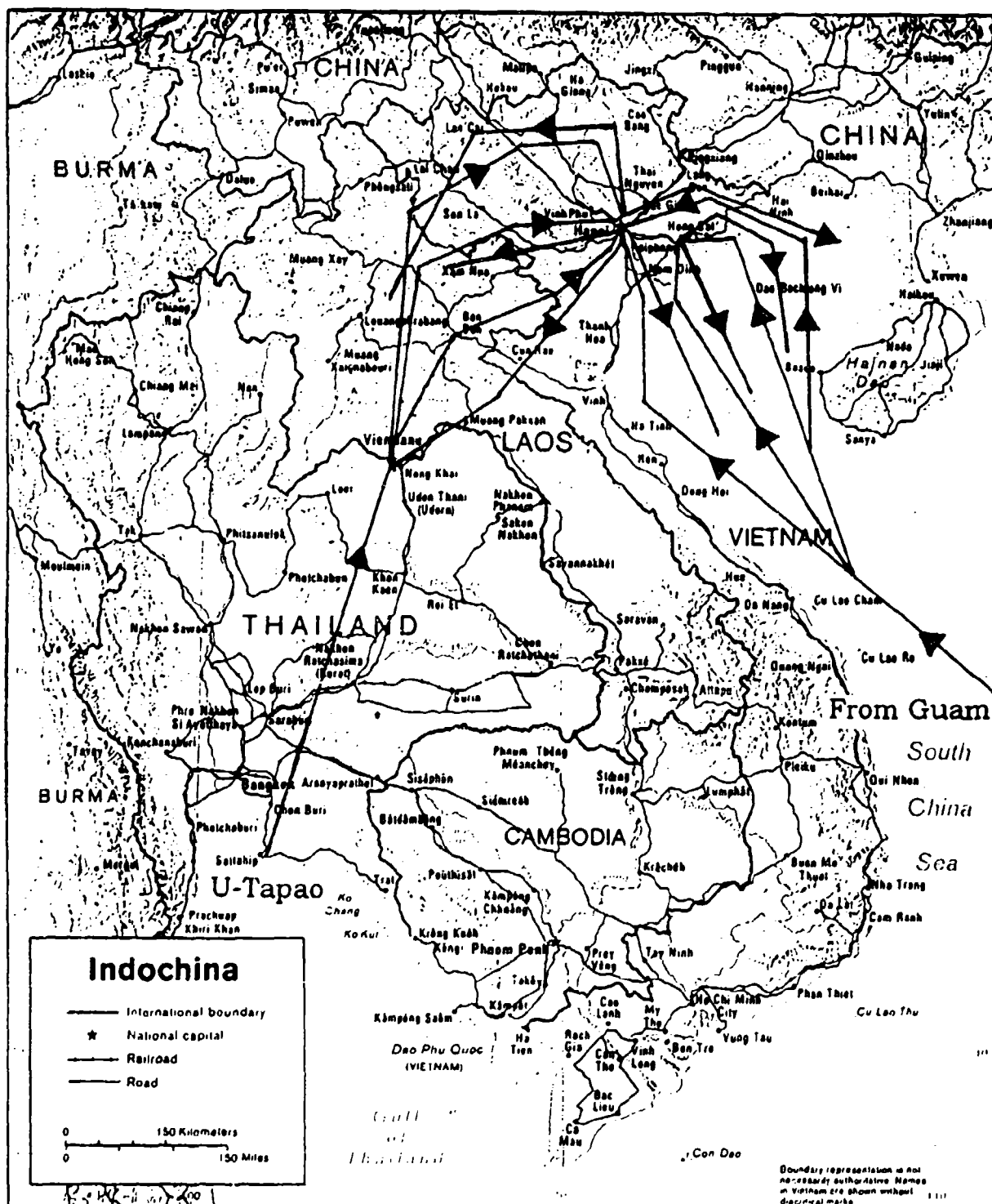
Though the bombing ceased for 36 hours, the political machine continued to encourage the North Vietnamese to negotiate for peace. On 22 December, President Nixon contacted Hanoi, requesting a meeting on 3 January. Nixon

had decided to stop bombing north of the 20th parallel by the end of December if the enemy agreed to the meeting. Hanoi did not respond, so renewed bombing was ordered against both Hanoi and Haiphong beginning on 26 December.

#### 26 December 1972

The most ambitious bombing of the Eleven-Day War, including 120 B-52s from Andersen and U-Tapoa, took place on the eighth day. Ten different targets were struck in 15 minutes. Hanoi was attacked from four different directions while Haiphong was struck from the east and south. The bombing halt had allowed the enemy to reinforce its defenses, and numerous SAM attacks were noted at both cities. Due to the varied routing and the decision to hit numerous targets simultaneously, only two B-52s were lost (See Figure 2).

The resumption of bombing on 26 December encouraged the enemy to contact President Nixon on 27 December, and ask to resume talks on 8 January. Nixon countered with his demands that discussions begin on 2 January with final negotiations on 8 January--a time limit for negotiations--and no deliberations on issues covered by the basic agreement.<sup>19</sup>



### Figure 2

## B-52 Routes Day 8-11

27 December 1972

On the ninth day sixty B-52s continued raids on Hanoi and a railroad yard near the Chinese border. Haiphong was omitted because the previous bombing had destroyed nearly all strategic targets. Once again, many SAMs were fired, but because of the damage inflicted on the site, most were unguided missiles, fired in salvoes. Two B-52s were destroyed--the last B-52s lost in the campaign.

28-29 December 1972

SAM storage sites and the railroad yard near the Chinese border were targeted for 28 and 29 December the tenth and eleventh day. Sixty bombers hit the targets using the varied routing and tactics proved successful previously. By this time in the campaign, aircrews felt the B-52 tactics were sound, and resistance was nearly nonexistent.<sup>20</sup>

The Eleven-Day War included 729 sorties flown by B-52s which dropped more than 15,000 tons of bombs against 34 targets. Air Force and Navy fighters flew an additional 1,216 sorties and dropped 5,000 tons of ordnance. Bombers destroyed 383 pieces of rolling stock and inflicted 500 cuts in railroad lines. Aircraft destroyed 191 storage

warehouses and reduced fuel supplies by one-fourth. Electric-power capacity was reduced from 115,000 to 39,000 kilowatts. Some interdiction and mining complemented the strategic bombing, affecting North Vietnamese resupply capability.<sup>21</sup>

Even with this level of destruction and the proximity of targets to populous areas, civilian casualties numbered approximately 1,600 killed and 1,200 wounded.<sup>22</sup> By comparison, during nine days of bombing against Hamburg in 1943, one-half the quantity of ordnance caused 30,000 civilian deaths. A two-day raid on Dresden in 1945 left nearly 200,000 civilians dead.<sup>23</sup> Although targets were military in nature, President Nixon wanted a psychological shock value associated with the bombings. Chairman Moorer told SAC Commander, General Gilbert Meyer, "I want the people of Hanoi to hear the bombs, but minimize the damage to the civilian populace."

## CHAPTER IV

### LESSONS LEARNED

Using the Snyder model to analyze the Eleven-Day War or Linebacker II helps us define, understand, and develop the strategy used in the air campaign. The consistency by which three presidents adhered to the objectives is remarkable, even though the objectives themselves were questionable. There is little doubt that the United States had an abundance of resources available throughout the war. These resources, however, were often misapplied, but not during the Linebacker II campaign. After the Easter offensive in the spring of 1972, President Nixon's strategy included using air power to end the war with honor.

As a variable in the model, technology was not used effectively, because of the limitations to which the United States felt compelled to adhere. There were continuous conflicts between military and civilian leaders. The civilians would not accept the military expertise in the application of resources; the military would not consider the domestic implications of the war. National style led the United States to be overconfident and overestimate the United States military capability while underestimating the capabilities and will of the adversary. Doctrine was a carryover from World



War II and the Korean War. Planners did not understand a "limited unconventional war" or a war of national liberation. Finally, political leadership failed miserably. American politicians defined objectives that were unattainable because of overestimation of resources and underestimation of the enemy's ability and determination.

The success of Linebacker II appears to cause the greatest disconnect pertaining to the results and lessons of the war. It is difficult to say it was not a tactical and political success. Tactically, the United States experienced only 2 percent bomber losses flying against targets better defended than any had been during World War II.<sup>24</sup> Politically, Hanoi went back to the negotiations and accepted our conditions for "peace with honor." Leading authorities argue that continued bombing of the North would have enabled the South to handle the insurgents and rebuild the country.<sup>25</sup> Douglas Pike, an authority on the mind and mood of North Vietnam, felt the North was shocked by Linebacker II and argues that if this type of all-out bombing had been made under Johnson in 1965, the goal of moving Hanoi's forces out of the South may have been achieved.<sup>26</sup> The United States, however, did not continue the efforts suggested by Air Force leaders early in the war. Two years after Linebacker II with the withdrawal of American forces, the North Vietnamese crushed the South Vietnamese and achieved their objective.

The Vietnam War destroyed two United States presidents, alienated the youth of the country, debased its currency, and stunted the country's will and ability to use military force to protect national interests to this day.<sup>27</sup> Did we learn anything from the Vietnam War, and in particular, the Eleven-Day War? Are we ready for another limited war employing the tactics of guerrilla warfare? Time will tell. In the meantime, can the United States be confident that goals will be both clear and attainable, and that military resources will be used effectively in the next war similar to Vietnam? Time again, will tell.

## END NOTES

1. Clausewitz, On War, pp. 88-89.
2. Gropman, "The Air War in Vietnam, 1961-1973," p. 280.
3. Snyder, "Strategy: Defining It, Understanding It, and Making It," p. 61.
4. Ibid., p. 64.
5. "The Statement and Testimony of General Maxwell H. Taylor," p. 266.
6. Ibid.
7. Clodfelter, The Limit of Air Power, p. 144.
8. Drew, "Rolling Thunder 1965: Anatomy of Failure," p. 288.
9. Gropman, "The Air War in Vietnam, 1961-1973," p. 273.
10. Clodfelter, The Limits of Air Power, p. 134.
11. Herring, America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975, p. 221.
12. Gropman, "The Air War in Vietnam, 1961-1973," p. 281.
13. Snyder, "Strategy: Defining It, Understanding It, and Making It," p. 64.
14. Ibid., p. 64.
15. Ibid., p. 65.
16. Ibid., p. 65.
17. Ibid., p. 65.
18. Clodfelter, The Limits of Air Power, p. 184.
19. Ibid., pp. 188-189.
20. Ibid., p. 189.
21. Ibid., pp. 194-195.

22. Ibid., p. 195.
23. Morocco, Rain of Fire Air War, 1969-1973, p. 160.
24. Gropman, "The Air War in Vietnam, 1965-1973," p. 280.
25. Ibid., pp. 280, 281.
26. Ibid., p. 281.
27. Ibid., p. 271.

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Military Studies Course-MS610, Readings: Book 2, Air  
War College, Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base,  
Alabama, June 1993.**